

# The Message of Religions to Mankind, what it should be - as viewed from a Buddhist perspective

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*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

Sangha Nayaka [Honoris Causa]

Amarapura Dharmarakshita Nikaya, Sri Lanka

Today we are assembled here internationally to celebrate the grandeur of two great events connected with the life of our Great Master, Sakyamuni Buddha. More than two thousand five hundred years ago, the eastern world came to be blessed and honoured with the birth of our future Buddha as Siddhartha, the son of a peace-loving, rice-growing chieftain named Suddhodana, at the foot-hills of the Himalayas in India. Thirty-five years later, the world was supremely blessed for all times with his attainment of Full Enlightenment or *Samma Sambodhi*, and becoming the Buddha. He did this as a spiritually oriented human, with his own initiative and enterprise. In doing so, he rose above all that was human, in thought, word and deed and reached a level with a self-earned glamour and grandeur, with no leanings whatsoever on any divine power or person. We refer to this state with pride as transcendental or *lokuttara*. Siddhartha was no divine emissary nor an *avatar*, a divine incarnation. We treat him therefore as supreme, unsurpassed, having none above him. He is therefore *anuttaro*. These, we believe, are more than one life-time achievements. These are well and truly products of *parami* or possible evolutionary achievements of human life, processed through time, past and present.

These achievements gave our Buddha the vision as to what we mortals truly are. He discerned the true plight of humans, caught up in this transmigratory or *samsaric* continuance, subject to ceaseless births and deaths, and also as to wherein lay their true salvation. Even prior to his final enlightenment [*pubbe'va abhisambodha anabhisambuddhassa bodhi-sattass'eva sato etadahosi*], we are told that even as an aspirant to this enlightenment, he had this picturesque vision of what we humans are, that we are in a terrible predicament of being born, ageing, dying and ceaselessly moving from one life to another [*sandhavati samsarati*]. This process is repeated through time and space and is very realistically viewed as not being very pleasant or agreeable. The acceptance of this belief carried also with it the implication that the humans could, in this process of journeying, descend even to lower levels such as animals, through one's own self-degradation, while being human. Herein lies the inherent and unavoidable painfulness of human living. And presumably, it is this perilous human situation which prompts all religions, even theo-centric ones, to silently pray for a 'thy kingdom come' beyond death, to transcend the human plane.

This, one must remember, is about five hundred years before the birth of Christ, i.e. before the appearance of the so-called great religions of the world - Christianity and Islam. Buddhism, unlike others, does not begin with a creation theory of the world. It believes in the evolution and devolution of the world, quite like the Big Bang and the Big Crunch. It is essentially anthropocentric. It categorically rejects the idea of a supreme being to whom the humans can pray or go to for protection and shelter to guard themselves against the suffering in the world. Neither does Buddhism contemplate a supreme power from above who controls the destinies of humans, punishes them in his wrath as was done to the miscreants of Sodom and Gomorrah, or purposefully take revenge - *vindicta mihi*. No teacher nor preacher of Buddhism, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, in any part of the world, or at any time, can afford to forget the vital words *attanoko anabhissaro*, i.e. there is neither an external protector nor controller of the lives of humans.

This new angle of vision of looking upon religion with man at the centre, of being anthropocentric, without divine assistance or divine intervention gives man, with the responsibility vested in him, a far greater initiative and therefore also a greater dignity in society. He is not among the *les miserable*. His purity or impurity in life is brought about by himself, without any dependence on or subservience to any other, human or divine. It is the way man lives in society, harmoniously with friendliness or *maitrī*, and without offence or violence to any other [*dvesa*], without arrogance and without self-righteous discrimination to preside and rule over others [*mana*], that brings about the desired holiness or wholesomeness into human society.

With this evolutionary concept of the world we live in and the associated idea of unity within it, without caste, creed and ethnic differences, Buddhism looks upon all life within it as being inter-related and therefore sponsors the need for these co-equals to follow a universal policy of peaceful co-existence. Man has therefore to respect the joint survival of man and contribute towards its unhindered continuance. This is a basic attitude that is recommended in Buddhism all the time. No man shall at any moment of displeasure or hostility wish ill of another: *byarosana patigha-sanna nannam annassa dukkham iccheyya*. This Buddhist protective mental attitude of loving, sharing and caring has to be like that of a mother towards her one and only child, guarding him at the risk of her own life [*mata yatha niyam puttam ayusa eka-puttam anurakkhe*]. In like manner, humans shall develop loving kindness towards all living beings [*sabbe satta*], wishing them security of life [*sukhino va khemino hontu*], with adequate comfort of living all the time [*sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta*]. In a special text of Buddhist chants called the Sublime Chant of Loving Kindness [Ratana Sutta], it runs as follows:

*Sukhino va khemino hontu  
sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta.*

Metta Sutta

In comfort and in security of life

may all beings live.  
May they all be comforted  
and enjoy security of life everywhere.

Translated by the author

We would choose to call this state of life in the world, in very simple words, moral goodness of mankind. It is our living with joy all the time, with no threat to none, from any where, in any way. On the other hand, Buddhism tells us all the time about the realities of the physical world, of the elemental threats like the tsunamis, volcanic disasters, typhoons and floods. Humans may, with diligence and timely judgement, reduce the severity of these calamitous situations, without kneeling down in utter confusion and asking for the why and the wherefore of these. Thus far is human disaster averting. No more. No divine powers are ever known to have prevented any such disasters, even at times when they are recklessly provoked and generated by man. At the same time, many in glee are even known to claim that these elemental disasters are well-judged acts of punishment by divine powers who are believed to preside over us. As Buddhists, we are totally in doubt about it. It is not by propitiating such powers or persons in a make-believe way that humans may, individually or collectively bring peace on earth or goodwill among men.

What then is the moral goodness that Buddhists contemplate in the alternative? It is the behavioural goodness of man alone, his thought, word and deed in relation to the other, the rest of mankind, near or far, in this continent or another. Buddhist magnanimity requires that this attitudinal change includes even the non-human world within it, including plant and animal. Two and a half millennia ago, the Jains and Buddhists of India did include them as part and parcel of the living world. The world of scientific thinking is seriously doing so today. With honesty within ourselves, let us think seriously of books like Biophilia Hypothesis dealing with this subject. The disastrously insurmountable today's global problem of environmental pollution, whether of the east or the west, the north or the south, brings this question before us, face to face. Whether in the

Great Lakes of North America or around the Sea of Japan, it brings before us humans, accused of wilful ignorance and ruthless lack of humanitarian goodness, no matter where we place the creators of these situations as world citizens. Let not the younger in the world today become stupid children and inheritors of older parents of yesterday.

The situation which the world has to face today is much worse than the Nuremberg trial of a few decades ago. But we do not propose to sit here in judgement over any. We only present what the Buddha offered as solutions to this tumultuous situation via his concepts of love, sharing and caring for the agitation and restlessness of man in the world, to reduce the jealousy, rivalry and intolerance of individuals as well as groups towards one another. In Buddhism, these solutions cover the behaviour of humans at two different planes.

The first covers the behaviour of humans at a very down to earth level in their day to day life and is contained in the category of *panca-sila* or the five basic injunctions of moral good living. Their being practised in totality together is insisted on. The first of these with which the group begins is the unqualified global respect for all forms of life, both human -and animal. This down-to-earth reality, we Buddhists maintain, has to be the essential basis of all religious thinking in the world. Anything that has life has a right to continue living unhindered. Under normal circumstances, no body chooses death as an option. Everybody would choose to continue living. The world today is turning back in this direction of thinking and is calling in question even the sanity of the position whether God ever created man first and animals thereafter for man's consumption. Science seems to be nearly converging on this position of unqualified respect for life, solely for the sake of survival of man on this earth.

Next comes the right of man to safeguard what he has justifiably acquired, i.e. without theft, plunder and violence, for his own use and comfort as well as for use by his dependants for whom he has to provide. Today the world is becoming extremely conscious of this need, and right across the globe, the idea is spreading of Neighbourhood Watch Areas. In fact, this social sensitivity of the

people, for the people, by the people seems to be going ahead of the state, and daily gaining more and more ground. This is what is specifically provided for under item two of the *panca-sila*, namely *adinnadana-veramani sikkha-padam* [= desist from dispossessing others of their legitimately acquired belongings, material or otherwise].

Moral goodness in the human community also requires that, reckoning with the gender difference of male and female, both groups mutually respect each other for their valid biological roles of reproduction of species within their society. This is where marriage is looked upon as a reliably trustworthy basis for social cohesion, pre-marital and extra-marital sex being frowned upon. This apparently did not carry implications of compulsory monogamy. On the one hand, Buddhism concerns itself with over-stepping proprieties of marriage like conjugal fidelity and on the other with trespassing on the spouses of others, whether by force or even with mutual consent. It is deemed a damnable offence.

*Yo mittanam sakhnam va paradaresu dissati  
sahasa sampiyena va tam janna vasalo iti.*

Vasala Sutta – Suttanipata

Whosoever trespasses on the wives of one's friends and acquaintances, whether by force or with mutual consent, he shall be deemed an outcast [*vasala*] in society.

Translated by the author

Within marriage, mutual trust or conjugal fidelity of the male towards the female, and *vice versa* carried a high premium in old world ethics, not necessarily of Asia. For purposes of social harmony, these should be carried out upon conventionally agreed norms set up by the societies themselves and their religio-cultural apparatus. Promiscuous behaviour in this area, for whatever reason it may be, like slum dwelling, broken homes, child abuse and drug-addiction lead to lamentable social imbalances like fatherless children, single parent homes and

rapidly escalating juvenile delinquency in identifiable crime areas.

Menacingly prevalent abortion in the world today is a consequence of this lamentably neglected area of sexual impropriety and misbehaviour in all manner of social groups today, whether in the east or the west, developed or under-developed, elite or otherwise. It is not to be denied that their genesis is quite often traceable to socio-economic cess-pools of ill-planned societies. But it is equally lamentable and even more surprising, to find in many parts of the world today, both believed to be developed and less-developed, these crimes, or sympathetically even call them tragedies, are veiled behind neo-modernist religio-cultural mantels. Morals, it may be pointed out are geographical or even variable according to time and place. Nevertheless, the corrosion and dents they make in society are far too shamelessly naked.

As the fourth item in the list of moral goodness or *pañca-sīla*, Buddhism presents honesty or truthfulness in social transactions [*musā-vādā-veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ*]. This *bona fide* in social dealings is also what is referred to as transparency, individually or collectively. The world today has become so keenly aware of its need and the unjustifiably vast acts of misanthropy it brings upon mankind, while moving large sums of monies from hand to hand that even not so large continents of the world have their erring ministers of state jailed on long-term sentences for such breaches of trust. Honesty, whether in public or in private, has to be the best policy.

Finally, *panca-sīla* stresses the need to guard humans from losing their sanity of judgement, by not being victims of drugs and alcohol [*yam pivitva visanni assa*]. The stress in the precept which reads as *surameraya-majja-pamada-tthana-veramani* is, more or less, on not being led to situations in which one is incapacitated or led to errors of judgement in action [*pamada-tthana veramanī*]. It is amazing to note that the breathalyser tests conducted world-over today on motorists who are suspected of being under the influence of alcohol is basically on this assumption. We propose that men who assault their wives, children or their neighbours under the influence of liquor should be prosecuted on

same grounds and be locked up in police cells. This would apply equally well, *vice versa*, to the females of the species as well.

What we have studied so far under *panca-sila* pertains only to a very small segment of Buddhist concerns under social well being and human welfare. What we endeavour here to do is to bring together what we call states or governments and world religions in such a way that neither contemplate on building empires here for their own benefit individually or mobilise their man-power resources for the glorification of divine powers elsewhere. But we pray that both groups rather work for the collective welfare of humans on earth under one and only one single heavenly or divine power above, wherever that be. Let us magnanimously think of unity of life on earth here, under the vastness of the sky above, or *Tien hsia* as the Chinese thought more than two thousand five hundred years before us.

Sukhino va khemino hontu  
sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta.

Metta Sutta

In comfort and in security of life  
may all beings live.  
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## Post Script

Many religions of the world today and many states larger and smaller, may perhaps in view of our living memory of massive world wars, devastating invasions and bloody conquests, heinous crimes, and just or unjust prosecutions and punishments etc. etc. deem it not unwise to delete from their religious scriptures and social philosophies hitherto accepted items of less acceptable thinking or add new items of more humanitarian considerations. These may



effectively be done either *in camera* or in public with global conscientious consent. Then and only then, would and could, any thing like a kingdom of man on earth be established here, prior to our aspiring for a kingdom of God in an unknown land elsewhere. We believe that it is the level of thinking the world should hopefully be arriving at today.

Dhammavihari